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ABSTRACT

Noting that the study of intrapersonal communication (inner speech) is increasingly recognized as an integral part of communication education, this paper argues that introspective writing, such as memoirs and personal journals, can be studied in communication classes for the confirmation they offer of theoretical descriptions of internal communication. Specifically, the paper argues that this kind of writing can be analyzed to discover common patterns in intrapersonal communication, such as helical thought development and chronology revision. The first major section of the paper discusses the helical model of communication, which uses the helix as a representation of the spiraling nature of intrapersonal communication, a continuing process that builds on past experience and affects future interactions. It illustrates this form of reflective writing with examples from the memoirs of Linda Leonard, Lynda Van Devanter, A. L. Rowse, Rosalynn Carter, and May Sarton. The second section of the paper deals with chronology revision as it appears in the writings of Hilary Masters and Eudora Welty, while the third section looks at reordering chronology to develop a personal myth, which is illustrated in the works of Masters and Sarton. The paper concludes that memoirs and journals are particularly useful because their writers sometimes reflect on the very mental processes they are recording, giving insights into the very nature of human thought. (FL)

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Helical Thought Development and Chronology Revision: Intrapersonal Communication Processes Reflected in Memoirs

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The brain has been called the last frontier.[1] Although the functions and organization of the brain are relatively well understood, the process of the mind engaged in thought eludes exact description. While brain activity can be scientifically measured, the development and continuity of thought can only be observed subjectively within oneself or indirectly as reported by others. Nonetheless, when thoughts are carefully reported and the resulting records compared, some recurring patterns appear confirmed. Memoirs are particularly helpful in revealing such patterns, for memoir writers record not only spontaneous thought, but also describe evolving and changing perceptions. Thus a comparison of memoirs can serve as one means of exploring intrapersonal communication. Among the common patterns which can be observed are helical thought development and chronology revision. These and other mental processes contribute to the formation of personal myth--a means of self-definition which is also reflected in memoirs.[2]

Helical Thought Development

Although the helical model of communication, as described by Frank E. X. Dance, is often applied to describe interpersonal communication, this model is also descriptive of intrapersonal processes.[3] The spiral shape of the helix not only illustrates that present interpersonal communication builds on past experience and affects future interaction; it also demonstrates that present thoughts affect perceptions of the past and future. The helix symbolizes that communication, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, is a process and no moment in the process is frozen or separate.

Drawing from neurosurgical research in which electrodes were shown to awaken particular memories stored in the brain, Harris and Harris conclude that all sensory elements to which the brain gives attention are recorded on a long-term "memory tape," and are available for replay.[4] (Once this analogy is accepted, it is only a short step to visualizing the tape spun in a helical shape rather than wound on a circular reel.) This conception of mind and memory is consistent with Frederick Perls' belief that every real contact results in a creative adjustment within the mind; every new experience to which a person brings full attention affects the permanent memory tape.[5] Perls' concept of <u>adjustment</u> suggests more than simple <u>addition</u> to the tape. New experiences may result in illumination or reconsideration of previously recorded perceptions. By including Perls' analysis, the analogy can be extended to include the ability of modern technology to clarify and amplify portions of a tape which are poorly recorded, damaged, or covered with noise. Within the mind, a new experience can produce an adjustment to previously recorded material, bringing new clarity of meaning (insight) to experiences that were taped at an earlier stage of life. And sometimes past entries on the tape seem to demand further attention. May Sarton describes this process of thought as she experienced it at age 70: "In the middle of the night things well up from the past that are not always cause for rejoicing--the unsolved, the painful encounters, the mistakes. . . . But all, good or bad, painful or delightful, weave themselves into a rich tapestry, and all give me food for thought, food to grow on."[6]

Honest reflective writing reveals this intrapersonal helix, as illustrated by Linda Leonard in her memoir <u>The Wounded Woman</u> and

recognized by her in this passage.

> Time is like an ever-moving spiral . . . . The future continually comes toward us but it meets us with our past at each moment of the immediate present. Each time this process happens, we are confronted with mysterious new levels of our being. We must meet the unknown future by bringing to bear everything that has been shaped by us in the past.[7]

Lynda Van Devanter's memoir Home Before Morning also illustrates the helix as she records her own struggle with "post-traumatic stress-disorder," a delayed reaction to the trauma of being a battlefield nurse in Vietnam.[8] Like others afflicted by this syndrome, she had tried to suppress her feelings while in the midst of catastrophic events. But unresolved images from the war continued to resurface and influence, even haunt, her life--as though the memory tape required clarification. The nightmares which always raised the question of "why" were finally eased when she drew on her experiences to help other traumatized veterans. By understanding them, she came to understand her own experiences and to recognize that she was one of the countless victims of the war. Seen again through this new insight, her memories now cause her sadness instead of guilt.

Similarly, A. L. Rowse, in A Cornish Childhood, brings a mature perspective to childhood events which troubled him at the time, but were beyond his understanding until much later.[9] And Rosalynn Carter says of her memoir, First Lady from Plains: "I learned a lot about myself by writing my book. I'd never realized how much my early experiences affected my later life."[10]

Sarton, in her memoir A World of Light: Portraits and Celebrations, illustrates that important influences linger and resurface in the mind long after the fact, and sometimes resurface in different forms. In this memoir, she is celebrating persons who touched her life with such intensity that she sees them as muses who inspired her writing. But Sarton finds that her perceptions of these people are not fixed. The quality of each person's impact is reconsidered as she views them through the perspective of time. She says:

> Writing of these people whom I loved has been a great deal harder than I could possibly have imagined. For nothing in the past stays fixed forever; as we grow and change the past changes; when I looked back I did not always find exactly what I had expected, and even such seminal friendships became minefields. Some unexpected conflict or painful memory exploded and changed all the fixed points.[11]

The reflections of memoir writers like Leonard, Van Devanter, Rowse, and Sarton, affirm the concept of an intrapersonal helix and give reality to the analogy.

Chronology Revision

When reflecting on past experiences, a person seldom follows a chronological sequence. The personal memory tape is often played out of order. The particular lack of chronology which characterizes childhood

memories may be due to limited encoding ability at a young age when the recording process is itself still maturing. Early memories which do exist seem dependent on repetition or strong emotional content. White and Pillemer describe such memories as generic or semantic in nature, with no temporal connection among them.[12] Bransford et al. go further by saying that memory throughout life is less a system of records than a "stage setting" which is modified and rearranged as successive events enlarge and illuminate the past.[13]

Hilary Masters, in his memoir Last Stands: Notes from Memory, begins with the funerals of his grandfather and father and moves backward to earlier events.[14] One of his reviewers observes: "This narrative order runs counter to chronology . . . but it remains true to the odd regressions of memory, that domain where the last events are most recent and hence preludes to all that went before."[15] Masters reviews complex images that remain in his mind, images which are comprised of many events and his still evolving perceptions of those events. Reflecting the seamless quality of his thoughts, Masters sometimes shifts years in mid-paragraph as one memory evokes another. Another critic calls this an "alloy of past and present" as "one scene yields to another and then resumes to be interrupted again, yet all parts advance a determined theme: a train ride to a new life, for instance, or the grandfather's need to establish his heroism."[16] Masters recalls his grandfather's stories of the last stands of cavalrymen and Indians, events which his grandfather lived, relived, and impressed on his grandson. But in retrospect he is equally influenced by the last stand of his elderly grandmother when she finally rejected her husband's coarseness and withdrew into her own mental world. Masters also remembers his father Edgar Lee Masters making his

last efforts to disprove the critics who thought him a one-work poet. In Hilary Masters' mind, the memories of his father's struggle merge with funeral images and give way to remembered moments when his father seemed larger than life or tragically diminished. In every life, recent events usually have antecedents and this memoir reveals the human mind reflecting on both at once.

Eudora Welty confirms, and indeed praises as a creative force, the revised chronology that deepened her understanding of her parents and distilled the themes of her life and her fiction. In her memoir, One Writer's Beginnings, Welty writes:

> Through learning at my later date things I hadn't known, or had escaped or possibly feared realizing about my parents--and myself--I glimpse our whole family life as if it were freed of that clock time which spaces us apart so inhibitingly, divides young and old, keeps our living through the same experiences at separate distances.
>
> It is our inward journey that leads us through time--forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us is moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover . . . .[17]

In another section of her memoir, Welty summarizes the process of time alteration and recognizes it as an important form of self-definition. In describing her own way of thinking, she may have grasped a universal process.

> The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily--perhaps not possibly--chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.[18]

Personal Myth

The mental revisiting made possible by a helical memory and the priorities that surface through a reordering of chronology contribute to the development of personal myth--a larger process which is also illustrated in memoirs.

Myth has most often been discussed as a collective process through which communities and nations define themselves. Joseph Campbell has written extensively of cultural myth as a reflection of the great patterns and themes of human experience.[19] Similarly, Alan Dundes finds in folk tales a definition of national character--basic truths which a people have distilled over time as means of remembering and restoring their best selves.[20]

But personal myth may be as important as cultural myth. Linda Olds writes: "With the guidance of myth we live, we remember how to live, and we witness to that living." Citing the conclusions of numerous scholars, Olds calls myths "integrative views of reality, attempts to pull together and confront the complexities of human experience," encompassing "that which is

within time and beyond time," and extending beyond mere "explanation or remembrance" to become "an actuality, a testifying, a resurrection."[21]

The process of personal myth creation is illustrated in Masters' memoir as he describes his mother's efforts to correct and sustain the image of his father. He also recognizes his own attempts to revisit the past in search of motivations and contexts which give meaning to linear events. He writes of his mother and himself:

> I have done the same thing in these pages, revisited the same scene or gone over the same material more than once; we both trace and retrace our paths across a small field comprised of five or six summers not to find anything that may have been lost but, somehow, to enlarge the perimeter of our search.[22]

Such myth creation requires reflection over time, and Campbell believes that social and personal changes are now occurring so rapidly that cultures and individuals are less able to assimilate experience and convert that experience into myth.[23] The result can be a loss of self-definition, as Van Devanter records in her memoir. During her year in Vietnam, the overwhelming carnage of the war destroyed her old myth of American moral supremacy and threatened her definitions of herself as a nurse and a woman. Her memoir records her struggle to create new and truer myths, and reveals her suffering and disorientation until the necessary reflection could gradually occur.[24]

Sarton, in her memoir Plant Dreaming Deep, recognizes myth creation as essential to mental health when she writes: "We have to make myths of our

lives; it is the only way to live them without despair. This is not to dramatize so much as to look for and come to understand the metaphor that reality always holds in it."[25]

Conclusion

The study of intrapersonal communication (or inner speech) is increasingly recognized as an integral part of communication education.[26] Introspective writing, usually in the form of personal journals, is used in some communication courses as a way of deepening self-awareness.[27] But introspective writings can also be studied for the confirmation they offer of theoretical descriptions of internal communication. Memoirs are particularly useful because memoir writers sometimes reflect on the very mental processes they are recording. Their records and their insights, by revealing the nature of human thought, provide maps into the last frontier.

Notes

[1] Richard M. Restak, The Brain: The Last Frontier (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979).

[2] See also Marvin D. Jensen, "Memoirs and Journals as Maps of Intrapersonal Communication," Communication Education, 33, No. 3 (July 1984), 237-42.

[3] Frank E. X. Dance, "Toward a Theory of Human Communication," in Human Communication Theory: Original Essays, ed. Frank E. X. Dance (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), pp. 295-99.

[4] Amy Bjork Harris and Thomas A. Harris, Staying OK (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 18-20.

[5] Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, Gestalt Therapy (New York: Dell, 1951), p. 230.

[6] May Sarton, At Seventy: A Journal (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 10.

[7] Linda Schierse Leonard, The Wounded Woman (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1982), p. 168.

[8] Lynda Van Devanter and Christopher Morgan, Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam (New York: Beaufort, 1983).

[9] A. L. Rowse, A Cornish Childhood (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1979).

[10] Freeman Reports, CNN, 2 May 1984.

[11] May Sarton, A World of Light: Portraits and Celebrations (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 15.

[12] Sheldon H. White and David B. Pellemer, "Childhood Amnesia and the Development of a Socially Accessible Memory System," in Functional Disorders of Memory, ed. John F. Kihlstrom and Frederick J. Evans (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979), pp. 61-67.

[13] John D. Bransford, Nancy S. McCarrell, Jeffrey J. Franks, and Kathleen E. Nitsch, "Toward Unexplaining Memory," in Perceiving, Acting and Knowing, ed. Robert Shaw and John Bransford (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), pp. 431-63.

[14] Hilary Masters, Last Stands: Notes from Memory (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982).

[15] Paul Gray, "Ambushes," Time, 29 Nov. 1982, p. 96.

[16] Peter S. Prescott, "Fathers and Sons," Newsweek, 20 Dec. 1982, p. 82.

[17] Eudora Welty, One Writer's Beginnings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 102.

[18] Welty, pp. 68-69.

[19] Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By (New York: Viking, 1972).

[20] Alan Dundes, "Life is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder: A Study of German National Character Through Folklore," Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology, 4 (1981), 265-364.

[21] Linda E. Olds, Fully Human (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), pp. 149-53.

[22] Masters, p. 108.

[23] Joseph Campbell, "Our Mythology Has Been Wiped Out by Rapid Change," U.S. News & World Report, 16 April 1984, p. 72.

[24] Van Devanter.

[25] May Sarton, Plant Dreaming Deep (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 151.

[26] The study of inner speech as part of communication education is discussed in two recent essays: John R. Johnson, "The Role of Inner Speech in Human Communication," Communication Education, 33, No. 3 (July 1984), 211-22; and Craig R. Streff, "The Concept of Inner Speech and its Implications for an Integrated Language Arts Curriculum," Communication Education, 33, No. 3 (July 1984), 223-30.

[27] Experiential uses of introspective writing in communication courses are described by Jaquelyn B. Carr, Communicating with Myself: A Journal (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1984); and Sandra Highnam and Patricia Geist, "Value Systems: A Prescriptive Journal Assignment," Communication Education, 30, No. 1 (January 1981), 54-57.